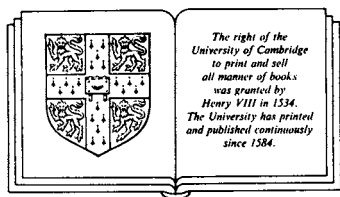


The plantation slaves of Trinidad, 1783–1816

A mathematical and demographic enquiry

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Introduction

... I speak ... as an inhabitant of the Island of Trinidad ... where slaves are not branded with a hot iron; where Families are not separated at the caprice of their owners, or by Judicial Sale for the satisfaction of Creditors; where the evidence of Slaves is admitted, even against their Masters; where every legal facility is afforded to the slave to purchase his freedom; and where he is presumed by Law to be free until proof is brought to the contrary ... ¹

Denied a local legislative assembly and ruled by fiat from London, Great Britain's recently acquired colony, Trinidad, often served as a pawn in contests for parliamentary power during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. In 1802, George Canning used the issue of Trinidad's future labor force – slave or free – to force William Pitt into opposition to Henry Addington's government in a parliamentary struggle.² Ten years later, Lord Liverpool, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, preempted a challenge to the fragile government of Spencer Perceval by promising the emancipationist James Stephen and his followers an Order in Council requiring the registration of slaves in Trinidad. Seldom were the desires and wishes of the residents of Trinidad considered.

Since its capture from Spain in 1797 during the Napoleonic wars, Trinidad had proved more a political liability than an asset to Great Britain. The colony had blossomed in the last quarter of the eighteenth century under the Spanish crown. The economic growth of the island was prodigious as migrants flocked to the island with their slaves at the invitation of the Spanish, anxious to establish plantations. Yet the driving force behind Spain's flourishing colony – the massive influx of French Catholic planters and colored freedmen – made Trinidad a thorn in the side of the British government. In 1797,

¹ W. H. Burnley, *Two letters and an Address to his Excellency Sir R. Woodford, Bart., and the Honorable the Board of Council*, p. 5.

² Patrick Lipscomb, "Party Politics 1801–1802: George Canning and the Trinidad Question," *Historical Journal*, 12 (1969), pp. 442–66.

Britain's new colony had a population that was thought to be, at best, treacherous: Spanish and French planters held no love for the British crown. Thus, rather than allow the residents of Trinidad a legislative assembly, as was enjoyed by other British Caribbean colonies, it was deemed best that Trinidad be ruled from London by a royally appointed governor.

The acquisition of Trinidad in the Napoleonic wars brought to the fore an issue that had been festering in Parliament for decades: the future of slavery in the British Caribbean colonies. By 1797, Parliament was committed to the eventual abolition of the slave trade. Trinidad, an island with exceptionally fertile lands, was largely uncultivated. The farming of new lands in Trinidad would require the introduction of a large labor force. Should that labor force be slave or free?³

Central to many of the parliamentary debates on slavery in the British Caribbean colonies were demographic issues. The antislavery forces in Great Britain – those advocating the abolition of the slave trade and those agitating for the complete emancipation of slaves – had long contended that mortality among the slaves in the British Caribbean colonies was extraordinarily high, especially when contrasted with the mortality of slaves in the United States. The opponents of slavery also claimed that slave fertility was extraordinarily low. The high mortality and low fertility were said to reflect the brutal nature of slavery in general, and of the use of slave labor in the cultivation of sugar in particular.

Supporters of slavery in the British Caribbean islands admitted that slave mortality appeared high and slave fertility low. But, they argued, these phenomena did not reflect the cruelty of slave labor; rather, they stemmed from the adverse effects of a tropical environment – which bore as hard upon Europeans as upon slaves – and from the behavior of slaves themselves. Slaves were felled by fevers and dysentery, about which the slave owners could do little: high slave mortality was beyond the control of slave owners. Furthermore, slaves were allegedly loath to enter into conventional, Christian marriages, indulging instead in promiscuous behavior that led to rampant venereal disease and widespread sterility. Hence, low slave fertility was also alleged to be beyond the slave owners' control.

It was clear to all parties that the combination of low slave fertility and high slave mortality would result in a slave population that could not be sustained without a slave trade. Hence, representatives of the interests of West Indian planters in Great Britain strongly opposed abolition, first of the transatlantic slave trade, and later, of the intercolonial slave trade. To abolish the slave trade and make the future of the slave labor force dependent upon the reproduction of the extant slave populations would, they believed, spell economic disaster for West Indian planters.

³ Lipscomb, *op. cit.*

The prevailing perceptions of the demography of British Caribbean slave populations played a key role in the debates about the abolition of the slave trade, in the debates about the nature of the Trinidadian labor force, and, in 1815, in the debates about the Slave Registration Bill. Some notions were accepted by all parties: for example, the conventional wisdom was that slave women born in the New World were more conscientious mothers than were slave women from Africa. Other notions were the topics of heated partisan debate. For example, although all parties accepted the premise that slave mortality was high, the antislavery forces contended that high slave mortality stemmed largely from the cultivation of sugar – a contention rejected by those representing the interests of the West Indian planters.

But were the widely held beliefs about the nature of slavery in the British Caribbean true? In fact, was it even true that slave mortality in the British Caribbean was especially high, and that slave fertility was especially low? Or were these observations about the slave populations, based at best on casual empiricism, erroneous?

The history and demography of many of the slave populations of the British Caribbean have already been extensively studied. The most ambitious of these are pancolonial, interdisciplinary explorations of Caribbean slavery that focus upon demographic and economic variation among colonies rather than on variation within a given colony.⁴ Other studies of slavery in the British Caribbean are less extensive, focusing either on a particular aspect of slavery, such as slave nutrition, or on a particular colony or plantation.⁵ Still others have compared the demography of slave populations in the British Caribbean with the slave population of the United States, a comparison often attempted by nineteenth-century writers.⁶

⁴ See, for example: Barry W. Higman, "The Slave Populations of the British Caribbean: Some Nineteenth Century Variations," in *Eighteenth Century Florida and the Caribbean*, ed. Samuel Proctor; Barry W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834*; Richard B. Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834*.

⁵ See, for example: Michael Craton, "Jamaican Slave Mortality," *Journal of Caribbean History*, 3 (1971), pp. 1–27; Michael Craton, "Changing Patterns of Slave Families in the British West Indies," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 10 (1979), pp. 1–35; Barry W. Higman, "Household Structure and Fertility on Jamaican Slave Plantations: A Nineteenth-Century Example," *Population Studies*, 27 (1973), pp. 527–50; Barry W. Higman, "The Slave Family and Household in the British West Indies 1800–1834," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 6 (1975), pp. 261–87; Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. Kiple, "Deficiency Diseases in the Caribbean," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 11 (1980), pp. 197–215; Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. Kiple, "Slave Childhood Mortality: Some Nutritional Answers to a Perennial Puzzle," *Journal of Social History*, 10 (1976), pp. 284–309.

⁶ See, for example: Stanley L. Engerman, "Some Economic and Demographic Comparisons of Slavery in the United States and the British West Indies," *Economic*

Despite the apparent abundance of materials on Caribbean history and slave demography, there is a relative dearth of scholarship about colonial Trinidad, both in the Spanish period (1498–1797) and in the British period. Early accounts of the history of Trinidad were written by P. F. M'Callum (1805), J.-F. Dauxion-Lavaysse (1820), E. L. Joseph (1838), P. G. L. Borde (1883), and L. A. A. De Verteuil (1884). The subsequent destruction in Trinidad of many of the Spanish and French documents on which these works were based means that, in many cases, these secondary materials constitute the only available sources describing some aspects of early Trinidad.⁷ In other cases, primary sources survive in British and Spanish archives.

There are also few recent monographs on Trinidadian history. Bridget Brereton and Gertrude Carmichael chronicled the history of the island from initial European contact to the present.⁸ James Millette wrote about the development of Trinidad as a British Crown Colony.⁹ Linda Newson studied Trinidad before and during the Spanish colonial period.¹⁰ There also exists a handful of journal articles that deal with various aspects of Trinidadian history.¹¹

The extant literature on British Caribbean slave demography includes some work on Trinidadian slavery, but the material about Trinidad is scant in comparison to that for other British colonies such as Jamaica and Barbados. Although the slave registration data for Trinidad are more detailed than those for any other British colony, complementary materials in the form of plantation records and journals are scarce in comparison to those of many other British colonies, rendering balanced studies of Trinidadian slavery all the more difficult.¹² Using the Trinidadian plantation slave registration records,

History Review, 29 (1976), pp. 258–75; Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, "Fertility Differentials between Slaves in the United States and the British West Indies: A Note on Lactation Practices and their Possible Implications," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 35 (1978), pp. 357–74.

⁷ Linda A. Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish Colonial Trinidad: A Study in Culture Contact*, p. 9.

⁸ Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783–1962*; Gertrude Carmichael, *The History of the West Indian Islands of Trinidad and Tobago 1498–1900*.

⁹ James Millette, *The Genesis of Crown Colony Government: Trinidad 1783–1810*.

¹⁰ Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish*

¹¹ See, for example: Gertrude Carmichael, "La Reconnaissance Estate, Lopinot Valley, Arouca," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 6 (1960), pp. 279–81; Barry W. Higman, "The Chinese in Trinidad, 1806–1838," *Caribbean Studies*, 12 (1972), pp. 21–44; K. O. Laurence, "The Settlement of Free Negroes in Trinidad Before Emancipation," *Caribbean Quarterly*, 9 (1963), pp. 26–52; Lipscomb, op. cit.

¹² Higman, *Slave Populations* . . . ; Newson, *Aboriginal and Spanish* . . . ; Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves*, has few references to Trinidad, suggesting a dearth of medical information about the colony.

Barry Higman studied the heights of slaves in Trinidad, Trinidadian slave family structure, and the African origins of slaves in Trinidad; Gerald Friedman also examined the height data in the Trinidadian slave registration records.¹³ Each of these studies focused on an individual facet of slavery in Trinidad, rather than trying to draw a complete picture of slavery in the colony. While including extensive tabulations of data from the Trinidad slave registration in his monumental book, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean*, Higman eschewed detailed analysis of the various data.

Despite the wealth of studies on Caribbean slavery and the inclusion of Trinidad in some of them, a fresh examination of Trinidadian plantation slavery, employing the British slave registration records and complementary archival materials, is warranted for several reasons.

First is the uniqueness of Trinidad's historical position at the time of the slave registration: Trinidad was at a far earlier stage of economic development than were such long-established colonies as Jamaica and Barbados. In 1813, when the initial registration of Trinidadian slaves was conducted, slaves had been present on the island in large numbers for only thirty years; only 10 percent of the land in Trinidad was under cultivation. No detailed study of slavery in such a frontier colony yet exists.

Second, in the past twenty years, mathematical demographers have created powerful tools with which to examine data collected in less developed countries. Such data have flaws not unlike those present in the slave registration records, including age misreporting and the omission of vital events. These indirect demographic estimation techniques often allow the general structure of a population to be elucidated accurately despite shortcomings in the data.¹⁴ The present study brings these tools to bear for the first time upon the comparably flawed slave registration data.

This work examines the interplay of the myriad forces that together shaped the plantation slave population of Trinidad. Unlike the comparative studies of slavery in the British Caribbean, which address demographic variation among Caribbean colonies, this study explores the sources of demographic variation within a single colony.

This study of the plantation slave population of Trinidad is based on the Trinidadian slave registrations of 1813, 1815, and 1816, in which the Registrar of Slaves recorded information on 17,087 plantation slaves.¹⁵ The slave

¹³ Barry W. Higman, "Growth in Afro-Caribbean Slave Populations," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 50 (1979), pp. 373-85; Barry W. Higman, "African and Creole Slave Family Patterns in Trinidad," *Journal of Family History*, 3 (1978), pp. 163-80; Gerald Friedman, "The Heights of Slaves in Trinidad," *Social Science History*, 6 (1982), pp. 482-515.

¹⁴ See, for example: United Nations, *Manual X: Indirect Techniques for Demographic Estimation*.

¹⁵ T. 71/501-2: Trinidad Slave Registers.

registration data give a blurred picture of plantation slavery in Trinidad in the period 1813–16. Errors in the data – misstated ages, mismeasured heights, erroneously recorded family relationships – mean that a sharp, clear image of plantation slavery cannot be discerned; however, as in many pictures, there is a good indication of the magnitude of the image and a rough outline of its shape. Thus the principal goal of this study is to draw plausible upper and lower bounds on the levels of plantation slave mortality and fertility in Trinidad in the early nineteenth century, with the hope that “truth” lies somewhere within the bounds. Insofar as possible, the sources of uncertainty – of fuzziness in the picture – in the estimated levels of fertility and mortality will be identified.

Using this approach to the study of plantation slave demography in Trinidad, several questions can be asked. Was mortality among the plantation slaves exceptionally high? Was fertility among the plantation slaves exceptionally low? Was the cultivation of sugar especially inimical to slave reproduction? Did the mortality and fertility of slaves born in Africa differ from those of slaves born in the New World? Were slaves who were owned by Catholics better off than were slaves who were owned by Protestants? Did the plantation slave population of Trinidad have the long-run potential for reproducing itself, thereby ensuring a slave labor force in Trinidad after the closure of the slave trade?

Several important questions cannot be addressed with the slave registration data from Trinidad. Slaves had been present in significant numbers in Trinidad only since 1783; thus, thirty years later, few adult slaves in Trinidad had been born on that island. The transatlantic slave trade was closed in 1807, and the intercolonial slave trade was closed a few years later. Thus, most of the slave children present in Trinidad in 1813 were born on that island. There were too few adult slaves born in Trinidad, and too few child slaves not born in Trinidad, to permit examination of the influence of Trinidadian birth on mortality and fertility in a statistically meaningful way. Similarly, there were too few colored adult women – women of mixed black and white ancestry – to allow comparison of the fertility of colored and Negro slaves in a statistically meaningful manner.

Another intriguing question cannot be resolved for want of information about European and free colored mortality. Trinidad was a frontier colony. Malaria and yellow fever were rife. If the mortality of the European and free colored populations were comparable to that of the slave population, then high slave mortality could not plausibly be ascribed to slavery itself, but rather must be attributed to a harsh physical environment.

The second chapter of this book briefly surveys the history of Trinidad from 1498, when Christopher Columbus claimed the island for Spain, to the registration of slaves in 1813. In particular, it traces the introduction of slaves to the island and the role of slavery in the economic and political development

of the colony. In a conventional demographic study, Chapter 2 would serve as a description of the background of the study population.

Chapter 3 examines in detail the collection of the slave registration data in 1813 and the ensuing controversy over slave smuggling; this chapter is analogous to a description of the data collection process. Chapter 4 describes Trinidad's population in 1813, including what little is known about the free population, drawn largely from the annual reports of the Commissioners of Population. Thus Chapter 4 corresponds to the data description section of a conventional demographic study. In this chapter, some of the characteristics of the personal and the plantation slave populations are compared, and detailed tabulations of many of the characteristics of the plantation slave population are presented. The chapter concludes with a description of Harmony Hall plantation in North Naparima county.

The use of formal, or mathematical, demography begins in Chapter 5, which describes the methods used in studying the mortality of the plantation slaves. The aim of the methodological discussions is to explain the details of the estimation techniques used in reconstructing the plantation slave population so that the assumptions underlying the estimates, as well as the sensitivity of the estimates to those assumptions, are clear. Some readers may wish to skip this chapter and proceed directly to Chapter 6, which presents the findings about plantation slave mortality. Chapter 7 contains both a description of the methods used in studying slave fertility and a discussion of the findings; again, the methods sections can be skipped without loss of continuity.

In Chapter 8, using the evidence – both statistical and historical – presented in Chapters 3–7, four main questions about the plantation slave population of Trinidad are addressed. First, how high was plantation slave mortality? Second, was plantation slave fertility high or low? Third, was there demographic evidence that slaves were smuggled into Trinidad in 1812 and 1813? And finally, did the plantation slave population of Trinidad have the long-run potential to reproduce itself?